

# Educational Goals for 21st Century Japan: Current Use of TED in the Language and Design Classroom as it Relates to 21st Century Goals for Education

Meagan KAISER<sup>1</sup>, Osamu SAHARA<sup>2</sup>

1. Department of Policy Studies, Nanzan University

2. Department of Information and Media Studies, Nagoya Bunri University

This paper continues a discussion of 21st century goals in education as they relate to the Japanese Ministry of Education guidelines, PISA outcomes and recommendations, and for broader contextualization, American approaches to 21st century education. With interest in meeting these goals at the university level, the authors are exploring the possibility of an experiment in melding of design and Media English into an interdisciplinary curriculum. This paper in particular looks at current practice regarding the use of TED talks in the English literacy classroom and in a basic design course. It also identifies ways that current practice is connecting to the 21st century goals at this juncture in time.

Keywords: media, English, design, communication, ICT, PISA, MEXT, Project Based Learning

## 1. Background

In our previous article, as foundational research for developing curriculum that better meets the needs of 21st century students in Japan, we looked closely at the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2012 results and the most recent MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) goals for education in Japan. From this exploration, we learned that the 2012 PISA results indicated that Japanese students' perception of their own ability to quickly understand, handle large amounts of information, easily link facts together, as well as their desire to take on the challenge of solving complex problems was significantly below the norm when compared with students of other participating nations, despite a respectable level of actual achievement on the test.

We found that the MEXT goals, implemented nationwide by 2012, urged schools in Japan to ensure not only that children acquire basic fundamental skills, but that students should also learn how to think deeply and broadly, make well considered decisions, and learn how to express themselves fully.

Taking both the PISA results and the MEXT directives into account, we concluded that one possible platform for experimenting with meeting these needs and goals would be through a collaboration between Media English and Design. The iterative nature of design and the broad range of possibilities for communication through various media appears to be a natural framework for us in terms of growing student ability to think critically and creatively, develop confidence, and find a strong voice for expression.

## 2. Framework for Discussion and Identifying Existing Strengths

The next step in planning is to set up a framework for discussion and identify current areas of our teaching practice that already begin to lend themselves to meeting the challenge of addressing the needs outlined by the PISA results and MEXT. This paper will focus specifically on a few of the ways that we have used TED resources thus far, as this is a tool that we have both used extensively in our respective classrooms.

## 3. TED Talks Introduction

What are TED talks and what kinds of related resources are available?

TED<sup>1</sup> describes itself as "a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics -from science to business to global issues in -more than 100 languages. Meanwhile, independently run TEDx events help share ideas in communities around the world."

As many people are aware now, the TED conference organizers make talks available on their website for free to anyone with an internet connection. There are multilingual transcripts and subtitles available in many languages on the site. The translations are made and peer reviewed by approved volunteers. Thanks to the work of dedicated English/Japanese translators, hundreds of talks are available with substantial bilingual support. The

transcripts as well as the talks are downloadable and Creative Commons Licensed for use.

#### **4. TED from an English literacy perspective: current practices**

Because of the relatively short lengths of the talks, availability of transcripts and translations and TED policies about avoiding excessive jargon in favor of clear and concise discussions of big ideas in common language, TED has been a very useful tool in helping students to make the transition from ESL/EFL "textbook" English to real, living language. Furthermore, because the talks are available in so many different subject areas, it is usually possible to find speakers whose content relates to students' interests and chosen area of study at university.

The definition of literacy starts with vocabulary, grammar, and basic reading skills, but literacy also encompasses the ability to think deeply and critically about content, to negotiate meaning in discussion with others, and to form new opinions, perspectives, and world-views that take these ideas into account. TED content has been exceedingly useful in helping students to reach towards this higher definition of literacy.

As Bloom's taxonomy<sup>2)</sup> suggests however, basic skills should not be overlooked in skill development. Proper scaffolding plays a role in the development of student confidence and language learning success. When students use TED as a reading comprehension tool, we begin by scaffolding key vocabulary and ideas through pre-reading questions and a gloss of the story. Often the gloss of the story is co-created on the board with students in a kind of guessing game with vocabulary clues and drawings. As described earlier, the PISA results indicate what appears to be a possible crisis of confidence in students. Eliciting guesses and ideas and co-creating are techniques that can be used for building confidence. Furthermore, these kinds of activities represent a series of baby steps towards greater ability to link facts and quickly understand concepts.

After the pre-reading, students watch the video of the speaker with Japanese or English subtitles and pick up more understanding of the topic. Next, students begin to look at two handouts. One is a guided reading question sheet and the other is the bilingual transcript. Examples of these can be found on the website linked in the References section of this paper<sup>3)</sup>. Guided reading questions are designed not to test comprehension, but rather to help walk students through the main points of a reading passage. The bilingual transcript is about learning how to study and analyze language for oneself. Students use colored highlighter pens to match up meanings in English and Japanese. The students circle new phrases or words they wish to study in the text and write these words in the right-hand margin as well. Quizlet<sup>4)</sup> vocabulary lists are also used as additional support for learning. Quizlet vocabulary lists are made by the teacher and work in conjunction with student created vocabulary lists to provide another scaffold to the language learning experience.

The phrase matching and vocabulary tasks described above are in designed around metacognition and helping students with forming a plan for breaking what looks like a wall of English into manageable, learnable packets of information. Furthermore, in the left-hand margin next to each paragraph, students are asked to write/choose a phrase to describe the main idea of each paragraph. It requires weighing the value of statements and distilling ideas down to their essence. Throughout all of these activities, students work in groups and are encouraged to think together. Finally, the culmination of a TED lesson in literacy at this point is the writing of a simple summary and reflection essay. In the first paragraph, students are asked to summarize the story. In the second paragraph, they are asked to make connections between the talk and their own experiences in life or study and make predictions for how the elements of the talk could impact our world in the future. Opinions backed up with examples or evidence are also encouraged. This is the current approach to TED talks as content for literacy instruction in the classroom of one of the authors. Looking at current practice through the filter of PISA results and MEXT guidelines, there are small inroads towards meeting these student needs, but still room for growth as well.

#### **5. TED from a design perspective: current practices**

As for design, this paper will look closely at a single example of a specific TED talk that has been used year after year in design classes taught by one of the authors of this paper. Two of the design curriculum goals are developing students' collaboration skills and introducing students to the importance of iteration in the creative process. Design works very often require us to collaborate with others to find a unique point of view or creative solution to problems. One way that TED has been used in the design classroom is through a specific talk by TomWujec, entitled "Build a tower<sup>5)</sup>, build a team." This talk has proven to be one very efficient tool for beginning a semester of design study. Both being able to use the video as a tool to explain about the design process and giving students the opportunity to take part in the activity that Wujec describes have been very helpful in the classroom. This talk centers around the lessons that can be learned from an activity called the "Marshmallow Challenge." In this challenge, teams have to do their best to build the tallest free-standing structure in 18 minutes while keeping the marshmallow on the top. Wujec says that most ordinary groups orient themselves to the task, make a single plan and then build a tower. But, they usually fail. The single plan sometimes doesn't work and subtle power struggles within the group dynamics can cause problems as well. On the other hand, when asked to take part in the same challenge, kindergarten students tend to use the marshmallow much more creatively and try out many possibilities amongst themselves to see how it works. Because of this try-try-again attitude, kindergarten students generally create taller towers than almost anyone except trained builders, according to Wujec.

Architects, engineers, and people intimately familiar with design do as well or better than the kindergarteners. If we look carefully at what Wujec is saying in his talk, the difference between success and failure at this task comes down to deficits in communication management and ability to engage with the iterative process. That iterative process is the core skill of design and the marshmallow challenge gives us a great opportunity to experience that at the beginning of a design course. Furthermore, the iterative process is at the core of the confidence problems that students identified on the PISA test. The try-try again nature of design teaches how to cope with complexity, how to fail without defeat, and develops the ability over time to solve problems and make connections more quickly. This particular lesson is an especially good platform for beginning discussion of such topics. Tom Wujec's voice as a highly successful professional designer talking about his craft is also invaluable. It lends greater credibility and perspective to the lesson. Furthermore, another advantage of this being a TED talk is the available subtitles in both English and Japanese. Access to this content would have been much more of a challenge without the subtitles being available. The bilingual aspect also provides an opportunity for a smooth transition into a language lesson similar to what was described in section 4 of this paper. There is opportunity for students to begin to see a need in the real world for language skills by learning design from an international resource.

## 6. In Conclusion

Since OECD's DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) has published key competencies, it is becoming standard to encourage 21st century abilities for participating countries. In the case of the United States, Common Core standards are implemented nationwide, and also P21's skills map has been included in the education goals for one third of the states as of 2014. P21 skills map especially places ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills as fundamental skills for the 21st century. At the same time, the P21 skills map also encourages integrating art theory in the language education field. For example, the skills map for English studies describes the demo class for creativity and innovation skills as below<sup>6)</sup>:

“EXAMPLE: After reading several trickster folktales, such as Coyote Stories or High John tales, and viewing two or three cartoons, students write their own contemporary version of a trickster story and present them as stop-motion or claymation films.”

Therefore, according to P21, it has been considered that art theory is a strong tool to encourage language learning in a 21st century environment.

This movement is also becoming popular in Japanese education. The Japanese ministry of Education is encouraging ICT skills and developing *Ikiru-Chikara* as fundamental skills for the 21st century. So, as one perspective for language education, it is a good chance to

expand horizons by integrating design or art theory with English education to cultivate new skills or competencies for the future. TED talks, as we have discussed in this paper, may be a useful tool toward achieving this goal.

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